

Jack-in-his-Kitchen

A One-Act Entertainment with Musical Interludes

By Daniel A. Rabuzzi

Setting: A broad kitchen under a low ceiling, flush with roseate light; bundles of sage, rosemary, and other herbs hang from the ceiling, along with strings of garlic, beans, and chile, two unplucked chickens, a haunch of venison, tripes, game birds (think of the still lifes painted by [Jan Weenix](#)); on the walls and counters are apothecary jars with labels for many spices (and some marked “tears,” “maledicta,” “thwarted hopes,” and similar), also an array of utensils, a full batterie de cuisine, copper gleaming; by the two stoves, a large chopping block, well hashed and beetled. Playing softly in the background is Telemann's [Fantasia for the Harpsichord in B Minor, BWV 33:15, I movement](#) (go to 1:06:54 of the video). JACK, dressed in a rust-red smock with many pockets, gently stirs a ragout. He wears a Tudor-style flat cap, and has clogs on his feet. The AUDITOR stands in the doorway, dressed in dark blue, wearing a tricorne hat, and holding a clipboard. A watch is attached by a ribbon to her left lapel, and some sort of medal affixed on her chest opposite. She addresses the audience with the sweep of a hand.

The AUDITOR: Nosy knifey Jack pulls in a clabber of secrets.

JACK looks up, first at the Auditor, then at the audience.

The AUDITOR: Oh nimble needly Jack, Jack-of-the-Word, with spells of excavation out-prying what he needs from one hundred small and hidden holes, out from under floorboards and pantiles, from squeaking drawers barely large enough to hold an envelope, from tumbles, ravel, rope-withies.

JACK opens his mouth to speak, shakes his head, says nothing, returns his gaze to the pot in front of him. He tastes the ragout from his spoon.

The AUDITOR: Jack-in-his-Kitchen, licks a sharp-edged ladle, surveys his ingredients, smiles, teeth on teeth, ears up.

JACK looks up again at the Auditor, shakes his head vigorously.

JACK: I dislike the narrator.

AUDITOR taps the watch on her lapel.

AUDITOR: The menu presents itself...

JACK: You were just as disagreeable on your last visit.

AUDITOR: ...the menu: a patent denied on merriment, a license for a reprimand, an obituary for joy, an octroi on honesty levied by people wearing wooden hats, a scorched crust of liberty and the carapace of constraint, a minim of grace left fluttering with half a wing smeared around the pestle's

knob...

JACK: When was that? Your last visit? One hundred years, more?

AUDITOR: And so endlessly on, a soubise lovingly creamed and riced, in a sauce-boat so large it almost displaces the sea it sails upon.

JACK puts down his spoon, turns full to the audience.

JACK: I'll intervene here.

AUDITOR: I'll have more to say.

JACK: I detect a caul of righteousness about her. She makes me out a thief, which I am not. I merely listen and observe, like the dogs Cervantes wrote about. Why tarnish me with the deeds and desires of the humans whose society I frequent? (Which is to say, all humans, if that point did not leap readily into your comprehension). All the hidden ingredients, the secrets unstanchéd, and needs uncasked, come to me willingly, without any effort of attraction on my part. A cook who watches his sink constantly re-filling am I. Après moi, le démiurge!

AUDITOR chuckles, makes a note on her clipboard, slips her pen under the clip of the clipboard, winks at the audience (pointing with her free hand at her eye for emphasis, as they do in a harlequinade).

AUDITOR: Yes, yes, a cook whose kitchen sits next to the mill of his cleverest devising, Denominazione d' Origine Protetta for a red-sunned terrain of wailing just outside the garden. Denial is no distress for him. Jack is nimble, Jack is slick.

JACK taps with his fingers on the nearest cutting-board, then picks up his spoon again, waves it at the Auditor.

JACK: To whom may I appeal such calumny?

AUDITOR: You might sue in chancery, though I doubt your case would find favor.

JACK: Not if you and yours sit on the bench.

AUDITOR: You know we do. We must. But that is not the cause of your indignance, sweet nifty Jack. We speak no slander. You cannot deny your harvest of ingredients, your brining, and curing, your sifting and your smoking.

JACK turns to the audience. As he speaks, the Auditor scribbles notes.

JACK: Not a groat's worth of truth in what she says. I but mind my kitchen, my bake-house, my mills and larders, and the garden attached, a humble copy of the original (the latter such an artifice, going on forever within its enclosure; I was the very first to offer congratulations for that trick). No topiary in my place, nothing so grand as what lies over the wall. Parietal scribblings might tell another tale though, infamies graffitied, tightly chalked flamboyant swirls, hey? Was not I who scrawled them.

The AUDITOR advances into the kitchen, puts her clipboard on a counter. As she does so, the Telemann fantasia fades out, replaced by [a gavotte by Lully](#). The AUDITOR speaks in time to the new rhythm.

AUDITOR: Ah, ah, mum, the sophist Jack, ready ever to direct us away from the by-ends, while he tends the paths that lead to the wickets in the wall. Ah, ah, bum, he could tell us more about the meals he prepares for the wayfarers. Ah, ah, mum, his encyclopedic assays yielding recipes for every appetite and every taste? Ah, ah, bum, his cates, bagatelles, delicacies, each conformed to the individual's fate and fortune?

JACK puts down his spoon and kicks off his clogs. He and the AUDITOR face each other, dancing the basic gavotte steps, i.e., the common [branle](#), on a four-count. [See video example [here](#).] Apart as they are, each position their arms by their sides as if they were holding the hands of other dancers. They speak to the beat of the dance.

JACK: I seek the public's compassionate intelligence. Yes, I prepare meals for the pilgrims – surely a virtue, not the misdemeanor she implies?

AUDITOR: Virtue in lies?

JACK: I tend not the roads down which the travelers walk, some mule-quick, some pacing as fastidious as the lynx, some tumbling after their tails like tantony-pigs, others racing like hares to a warren.

AUDITOR: Yet roads lead to?

JACK: Calm and radiant slots of verdure at the outset, peach willow ways, pink whorled parade grounds, everything Arcadian, until and usually too late, the travelers encounter the nettles, old-man-in-the-spring, bindweed, the stiles made of hop-hornbeam rearing up behind them.

AUDITOR: Casting blame where?

JACK: Then hey ho are they shocked to discover, pretending to forget -- or forgetting in truth-- that they planted and laid these themselves. Nothing had I to do with the sowing, am present only for the reaping; nothing to do with the building, am there only for the stumble and the fall.

AUDITOR sighs, shakes her head.

AUDITOR: But there you are, Jack, there you are. Ah, ah, you acknowledge you are there, at the end, a cicerone, an innkeep, the cook with his gridiron and spit, the miller whose breadstones grind fine. Your arguments lack weight and shape. You are like a man boxer-stepping on monkey-stilts through the fields of truth.

JACK hops up and down, breaking the gavotte's tempo; he picks up his spoon and points it at the AUDITOR. The AUDITOR stops dancing, picks up her clipboard. Gavotte fades out. JACK spits the following without accompaniment, vivace, moving the spoon to the beat of his words.

JACK: Picturesque, to be sure, but the “fields of truth,” hah! they flicker with a low mist of lies, dandled by leaves, a glossy film of hairstreak lies, panicked pearly lies, velvety skipping satiny lies, the cloak over mendacious mourning, the dice-box lie, the lie that waggles frondy eyebrows to deceive, all finding their way flit-&-flit and twitchery-hoo over the wall, carried by the breezes back up the roads into the widest world.

AUDITOR mock-claps.

JACK: Browning's Bishop Blougram said it well: “’tis an old mistake / To place hell at the bottom of the earth.”

AUDITOR: Well done, quick Jack, Jack-of-the-Word, Jack-in-Your-Kitchen, molto bene ciccio. You amuse with camphor corantos, your book of imaginary silks, a weft of brisant innuendos. I could listen all day, but why burden the public?

JACK [*half-turning to the audience, pointing to it*]: As you mistake me, you underestimate them. So typical of your kind, smug in your high station.

AUDITOR [*continuing to face Jack*]: Not at all. Their good will and massed introspection form the basis of my estimation.

JACK: Yet you would curtail my arguments for fear that they will overwhelm the wit of our audience.

AUDITOR: Not at all, my dear Jack-with-his-Ladle. Not their wit I worry your verbiage will weary but their patience.

JACK: Still they listen to me, without constraint, under no compulsion save their own.

AUDITOR: Because your words flow like broth, bullioned with reason seeming fine and spiced with images most fantastical. A night-snack for those whose time is much more limited than ours.

JACK: I will protest directly to my friends beyond the footlights.

JACK turns fully to face the audience, and uses the spoon to highlight his points. Telemann fantasia fades in.

JACK: Dear audience, please tell me you also witness the scorn directed at me. Please comfort me. Her warm words wrap themselves in false fabrics.

AUDITOR *[turning to face the audience]*: Not scorn but truthful discipline.

JACK: My head I could hold detached, at arm's length, yet still I could hear the scrapefruit sawtooth prayers lifted over the garden walls, the walls list blanching wrinkled when you look at them head on.

AUDITOR: A novel perspective.

JACK: If you had the time, dear public, I would sketch for you a map of that place, the yon-bells wrapped in wool, the roads more goatwalk than promenade.

AUDITOR: Now the cook will be cartographer!

JACK: I could rummage through the news shared by those who dwell within those wall, scavenge from their doxology, unpick its threads, if only you had more time.

AUDITOR: That's my job, not yours, dear Jack.

JACK: May I have a final word?

AUDITOR adjusts her tricorne, with glances over her shoulder at JACK.

AUDITOR: Oh Jack, I think you do not understand, for all your acrobatics. You *are* the final word. The last utterance before the gate is found and opened. The uttermost plaint for those who may need to enter by another way, or on another schedule.

JACK looks aghast. No one speaks for several beats.

JACK: But no, I am just the cook, the keeper of the tidy flame, cheerful over stew.

AUDITOR: Think, Jack, think, back to your beginnings...

JACK slowly retreats to his pot of ragout and commences to stir it once more.

JACK: A dash of coriander, a hint of sage. A bit of misplaced pride, grated rind of sanctimony.

AUDITOR: You know language begins again on the other side of the wall. We invent a new grammar and birth a new syntax there, over and over.

JACK: Just and only the ingredients that travelers bequeath to me, the leavings of their voyage. No more my creation than my burden, a menu inexhaustible.

AUDITOR: Dream yourself back, Jack-in-his-Kitchen. Recall your first role there. Think (I say not brood or fulminate), dream, remember.

JACK: Pickling what the travelers offer and reveal, meals for their restitution.

AUDITOR *[tapping her watch]*: I will be back next Tuesday, a century hence. Until that time, I leave you to your shopping and your ladles, your recipes and your sauce-boat. Come, audience, let us depart.

AUDITOR turns and walks out the door, leaving JACK in the kitchen as the lights dim and the music fades until curtain fall.

{ – end – }